

For Immediate Release
Date: February 01, 2005
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Corrections program allows victims to meet with their offenders

The Montana Department of Corrections (DOC) announces a pilot program of Victim-Offender Dialogue, in which victims of felony crimes committed by adults may meet, under certain circumstances, with their offenders in prison or under DOC community supervision such as probation or parole.

Victims who have participated in Victim-Offender Dialogue in other states report that the process helps them heal from the trauma of being victimized. The process provides a safe environment in which to confront the offender with the harm he or she caused, and obtain answers only the offender can provide.

The program is voluntary for both parties. However, only the victim can initiate the process, said DOC Victim Information Specialist Sally Hilander. "We will not contact victims directly because a phone inquiry or letter from someone in the justice system might be a traumatic reminder of the crime," Hilander said. "We hope victims who are interested in finding out more about this opportunity will come to us."

When a victim expresses interest in the process, DOC staff at the facility will meet with the offender. If the offender agrees to participate, and has admitted the crime, screening and preparation can begin. This process can be lengthy because in-depth preparation is critical.

Any victim or offender can decide during the preparation process not to go forward. "We want everyone involved to be comfortable exploring this opportunity, and to know it's okay to change their minds," Hilander said. DOC will not allow Victim-Offender Dialogue in stalking or domestic violence cases, but most other violent and nonviolent felony crimes will be considered. Parents or legal guardians may participate in Victim-Offender Dialogue on behalf of a minor.

Volunteer facilitators with extensive mediation training will conduct the Victim-Offender Dialogues in a carefully controlled, supportive environment to minimize the risk of physical or psychological harm. DOC provided basic and advanced training for staff and volunteers last autumn with national leaders in the field of restorative justice.

Participating offenders receive no tangible benefits such as a sentence reduction or the prospect of early parole. However, national data show offenders often emerge from a Victim-Offender Dialogue with a better understanding of the harm they caused, and are less likely to commit more crimes if they are released.

Victims and others who are interested in learning more about Victim-Offender Dialogue, or who want a program brochure, may call Hilander toll-free at (888) 223-6332, e-mail her at [Sally Hilander](mailto:Sally.Hilander@mt.gov), or write Montana Department of Corrections, P.O. Box 201301, Helena, MT 59620-1301.